

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Research at Birmingham

Assessment and management of alcohol use disorders

Day, E.; Copello, A.; Hull, M.

DOI:
[10.1136/bmj.h715](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.h715)

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Day, E, Copello, A & Hull, M 2015, 'Assessment and management of alcohol use disorders', *BMJ (Online)*.
<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.h715>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.



CLINICAL REVIEW

Assessment and management of alcohol use disorders

Ed Day *senior lecturer and consultant in addiction psychiatry*¹, Alex Copello *professor*², Martyn Hull *GP principal and lead GP with a special interest in substance misuse*³

¹Addictions Department, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience, King's College London, London SE5 8AF, UK; ²School of Psychology, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; ³Ridgacre Medical Centres, Quinton, Birmingham, UK

Alcohol can impact on both the incidence and the course of many health conditions, and nearly 6% of all global deaths in 2012 were estimated to be attributable to its consumption.¹ A quarter of the UK adult population drinks alcohol in a way that is potentially or actually harmful to health.² Between 2002 and 2012 in England the number of episodes where an alcohol related disease, injury, or condition was the primary reason for hospital admission or a secondary diagnosis doubled.³ Despite the large numbers of people drinking alcohol at higher risk levels, a relatively low number access treatment.⁴ Possible causes for this include missed opportunities to identify problems, limited access to specialist services, and underdeveloped care pathways. International studies have shown that more than 20% of patients presenting to primary care are higher risk or dependent drinkers,⁵ yet the problem of alcohol is inadequately addressed. This review focuses on practical aspects of the assessment and treatment of alcohol use disorders from the perspective of the non-specialist hospital doctor or general practitioner.

How are alcohol use disorders defined?

As the level of alcohol consumption goes up, so the risk of physical, psychological, and social problems increases. Alcohol related harm is a public health problem, and strategies that reduce average consumption across the whole population by even a small amount produce considerable health benefits. Increasing the cost of alcohol has been consistently associated with a reduction in alcohol related harm,⁶ and a minimum cost for a unit of alcohol has been under consideration in the United Kingdom.⁷

Alcoholic drinks have different strengths, and so alcohol is not measured by number of drinks but by number of "units." In the United Kingdom, 1 unit comprises 8 grams of alcohol (equivalent to 10 mL of pure ethanol), but elsewhere this value is defined differently.⁸ Box 1 shows how to calculate the number of units. The terminology used to define alcohol use disorders is currently evolving, with various organisations using slightly different terms.^{9 10} However, the general agreement is that there is no such thing as a "safe level" of drinking and that the risk of harm increases with either frequency of consumption or

amount consumed on a drinking occasion.⁸ To plan effective intervention strategies, the categories of alcohol use disorders defined in table 1 are most commonly used. Figure 1 shows the prevalence of these categories in England.

The term "addiction" is not used in current classificatory systems, partly because it has pejorative connotations. The latest version (fifth edition) of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* has removed the category of dependence, and instead describes a spectrum of alcohol use disorders of differing severity.¹¹ The concept of alcohol dependence is, however, important to describe people in whom the ability to control the frequency and extent of consumption has been completely eroded, while recognising that dependence may exist at different levels of severity.^{12 13}

How can alcohol use disorders be identified?

Most people with risky patterns of drinking are not dependent on alcohol (fig 1). A few minutes spent systematically identifying drinkers at increased risk of harm and delivering advice about moderating alcohol consumption has been shown to be an effective strategy in various settings,^{14 15} and the process of identification and brief advice should be offered as a first step in treatment.⁴ In the United Kingdom, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends that professionals in the National Health Service should carry out alcohol screening as part of routine practice,⁴ and all doctors should feel comfortable and confident in raising the topic of alcohol consumption in a consultation. However, the low level of detection and treatment suggests that generalists are not sufficiently proactive in screening groups potentially at risk, including those who have relevant physical conditions (for example, hypertension and gastrointestinal or liver disorders); mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression; been assaulted; are at risk of self harm; regularly experience unintentional injuries or minor trauma; and regularly attend genitourinary medicine clinics or repeatedly seek emergency contraception.

The bottom line

Alcohol use disorders exist across a spectrum, and public health measures to reduce the drinking of a whole population have considerable health benefits

All front line clinicians should be aware of the potential effects of alcohol consumption and be able to screen for alcohol use disorders using the alcohol use disorders questionnaire test

Brief interventions are quick and easy to deliver and have a potentially large impact on reducing hazardous and harmful drinking

Benzodiazepines are the drug of choice for medically assisted alcohol withdrawal

Relapse to drinking is common in the first year after stopping drinking, but psychological treatments, mutual aid groups, and relapse prevention drugs increase the likelihood of remaining abstinent

Sources and selection criteria

We structured this review around a series of clinical guidelines developed by the UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Three separate expert groups considered public health, physical, and psychological and social issues around alcohol use. The guidance is summarised in the form of clinical pathways (<http://pathways.nice.org.uk/pathways/alcohol-use-disorders>).

Box 1: How to calculate units of alcohol

The alcohol content of a drink is usually expressed by the standard measure "alcohol by volume," or ABV. This is a measure of the amount of pure alcohol as a percentage of the total volume of liquid in a drink and can be found on the labels of cans and bottles. For example, if the label on a can of beer states "5% ABV" or "alcohol volume 5%," this means that 5% of the volume of that drink is pure alcohol.

The number of units in any drink can be calculated by multiplying the total volume of a drink (in millilitres) by its ABV (which is measured as a percentage) and dividing the result by 1000. For example, the number of units in a pint (568 mL) of strong lager (ABV 5%) would be calculated:

This is worth doing, as the increasing strength of many alcoholic drinks and the larger glass sizes served in bars mean that people are often drinking more alcohol than they realise.

Units calculators are available (for example, www.nhs.uk/Tools/Pages/Alcohol-unit-calculator.aspx)

AUDIT, the alcohol use disorders identification test (fig 2), consists of 10 questions about drinking frequency and intensity, experience of alcohol related problems, and signs of possible dependence.¹⁶ It is the ideal screening questionnaire for detecting drinkers at increasing or higher risk.¹ Furthermore, the AUDIT score can guide clinicians as to the best intervention, including brief advice or a referral to specialist services (box 2). Owing to the potentially more important effects of alcohol on certain populations, scores should be revised downward when screening young people aged less than 18, or adults aged more than 65 (see box 2). Biochemical measures such as liver function tests are not normally used for screening, but may be helpful in assessing the severity and progress of an established alcohol related problem, or as part of a secondary care assessment.¹⁷

A guiding style that aims to build motivation and avoid confrontation is recommended, and motivational interviewing has shown considerable promise in this area. Although a review is beyond the scope of this article, useful materials can be found at www.motivationalinterviewing.org.

What treatments are available for alcohol dependence in the non-specialist setting?

Identification and brief advice is an important public health approach because of the numbers of people drinking at increasing risk or higher risk levels. However, even after gold standard brief interventions in primary care, nearly two thirds of people will still be drinking at an increasing or higher risk level.¹⁵ At the "dependent" end of the drinking spectrum, change is even more difficult to achieve. People with a moderate to severe level of alcohol dependence may benefit from more intensive help from mutual aid groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or specialist treatment services, or both.⁴ Abstinence is the preferred goal for many such people, particularly for those whose organs have already been damaged through alcohol use, or for those who have previously attempted to cut down their

drinking without success. In considering the correct level of treatment intensity it is important to consider risks, capacity to consent to treatment, the experience and outcome of previous episodes of treatment, motivation for change, and other existing problems, including harm to others.

Three interventions may assist generalists in altering the drinking trajectory: medically assisted withdrawal, facilitation through mutual aid, and use of drugs to prevent relapse.

Medically assisted withdrawal

The alcohol withdrawal syndrome develops when consumption is abruptly stopped or substantially reduced, and symptoms and signs appear within 6-8 hours. These include anxiety, tremor, sweating, nausea, tachycardia, and hypertension, usually peaking over 10-30 hours and subsiding within two or three days. Seizures may occur in the first 12-48 hours (but rarely after this), and delirium tremens is a serious condition that occurs 48-72 hours after cessation of drinking, characterised by coarse tremor, agitation, fever, tachycardia, profound confusion, delusions (characteristically frightening), auditory and visual hallucinations, and possibly hyperpyrexia, ketoacidosis, and circulatory collapse.

Minor degrees of alcohol withdrawal are common and can be managed with information, reassurance, and adequate fluid intake. However, the alcohol withdrawal syndrome is potentially life threatening; systematic reviews recommend long acting benzodiazepines (chlordiazepoxide or diazepam) as the drug of choice for managing the alcohol withdrawal syndrome and preventing serious complications such as seizures or delirium tremens.^{19 20} The aim is to titrate the initial dose to the extent of withdrawal symptoms and then slowly to reduce the dose over 7-10 days using a standard fixed dose protocol (table 2). Rating scales such as the clinical institute withdrawal assessment for alcohol (CIWA-Ar) can be used to measure the severity of the withdrawal symptoms and more accurately adjust the dose, but

Box 2: Delivering alcohol identification and brief advice in practice*The rationale*

A large body of international research evidence indicates that 1 in 8 people drinking at increasing risk or higher risk levels who receive structured brief advice reduce their drinking to within lower risk levels.⁴ Raising the problem of alcohol consumption with patients often meets with several attitudes, including indifference, confusion about what is and is not healthy, and possibly defensiveness and irritability. Clinicians should ensure that they are aware of the facts about alcohol consumption and health related harms to convey the risks of drinking to patients accurately. It is important to avoid stigmatising terms such as "alcoholic," emphasising the concept of increasing risk with increasing consumption and suggesting trying to cut down to a lower risk level rather than stopping. Clinicians should also be able to detect alcohol dependence and refer to specialist help.

Stage 1: raise the problem

The most time and resource effective strategy in non-specialist settings is to target those at greatest risk—that is, people with relevant physical (for example, hypertension, gastrointestinal or liver problems) or mental health (anxiety or depression) conditions, at risk of self harm, or who regularly experience unintentional injuries or minor trauma.

Ask the first three questions on the AUDIT questionnaire (see fig 2) and score the answers (known as AUDIT-C).

Score of ≥5—suggests a high likelihood that the patient is drinking at an increasing risk level, and the full AUDIT questionnaire should be administered (this threshold may be reduced to 3 or more in young people aged less than 18 years or adults older than 65 years)^{30 31}

Stage 2: administer and score the 10 item AUDIT questionnaire

Score ≤7—this result should be fed back in a positive manner—for example, reiterate the sensible drinking guidelines and point out that people who exceed these levels increase their chances of alcohol related health problems such as unintentional injuries, high blood pressure, liver disease, cancer, and heart disease, while congratulating them for adhering to guidance

Score 8-19—this suggests that the patient's drinking pattern is in the increasing risk or higher risk band, and clinicians should move to offering brief advice as described in stage 3

Stage 3: deliver structured brief advice

Use an open ended "transitional" statement such as "how important is it for you to change your drinking?," possibly accompanied by a simple "readiness ruler"—that is, ask patients to rate between 1 and 10 how confident they feel in making changes. This can be followed by asking what would have to happen to make the number go up.

A structured episode of brief advice may only last 5-10 minutes and is best guided by a structured advice tool (for example, www.alcohollearningcentre.org.uk/alcoholLearning/learning/IBA/Module4_v2/pdf/structured_advice_tool.pdf). This makes use of the FRAMES (feedback, responsibility, advice, menu, empathy, self efficacy) structure for brief interventions. The leaflet provides material to use for three of these elements:

- Feedback on patients' level of drinking when compared with others, the common effects of drinking, and the potential benefits of reduction
- A menu of options to support the attainment of their preferred drinking goal
- Advice on units and limits

Clinicians should aim to be firm enough to ensure that patients realise that it is their responsibility to make the change (restating the need to reduce risk and encouraging patients to begin now), while also showing empathy (for example, "it can be very difficult to make these changes if everyone around you is drinking heavily") and aiming to boost their confidence and self efficacy ("You mentioned you were going to drink a non-alcoholic drink first when you get home in the evening. That sounds like an excellent start. Let's see how you get on and arrange another time to talk to discuss how you get on").

It is a good idea to offer a follow-up appointment to assess progress. An "extended brief intervention" places greater emphasis on exploring the pros and cons of change and formulating a specific action plan. This approach is often based on the principles of motivational interviewing,¹⁹ and again is best guided by a structured leaflet such as the one available at www.alcohollearningcentre.org.uk/alcoholLearning/learning/IBA/Module5_v2/extended_intervention_worksheet.pdf.

Patients should be referred for more specialist alcohol assessment and intervention if they ask for such help, already exhibit major alcohol related harm, have an AUDIT score of >20, or exhibit features of the alcohol dependence syndrome.

A step by step teaching module and full range of materials is available at www.alcohollearningcentre.org.uk/eLearning/.

the use of such a regimen triggered by symptoms is only recommended if trained staff are available, such as in an inpatient setting.²¹ Prescribing in the community for alcohol dependent patients without adequate assessment and support is not recommended, as successful withdrawal is unlikely and there are considerable associated clinical risks. This is a common scenario facing general practitioners, and expeditious referral to specialist services for support from a specialist alcohol nurse during medicated withdrawal is advised.

Doses of benzodiazepines should be reduced for children and young people aged less than 18 years, adults aged more than 65 years, and those with impaired liver synthetic function, such as reduced albumin or increased prothrombin time (where a benzodiazepine requiring less metabolism within the liver, such as oxazepam, may be preferred). Clinicians should be aware of complications from nutritional deficiency, such as the Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome. This should be suspected in anyone with a history of alcohol dependence and one or more of ophthalmoplegia, ataxia, acute confusion, memory disturbance, or unexplained hypotension, hypothermia, or unconsciousness. Treatment with intramuscular or intravenous thiamine is important to prevent permanent memory loss and should continue until the symptoms and signs stop improving.²¹

Most episodes of medically assisted alcohol withdrawal can take place at home, but inpatient treatment should be considered if patients drink more than 30 units of alcohol daily, have a history of epilepsy, withdrawal related seizures, or delirium tremens, or have comorbid physical or mental health conditions.¹⁹

Mutual aid facilitation

Treatment of alcohol withdrawal is not sufficient on its own and should be viewed as the precursor to a longer term treatment and rehabilitation process. Research consistently shows that people with alcohol dependence who have stopped drinking are vulnerable to relapse and that they may have unresolved problems that predispose them to it.²² Mutual aid groups (for example, Alcoholics Anonymous and UK SMART Recovery) are a source of ongoing support for people seeking recovery from alcohol dependence, and for partners, friends, children, and other family members. Long term cohort studies show that people who actively participate in mutual aid are more likely to sustain their recovery,²³ and NICE recommends that treatment staff should routinely provide information about mutual aid groups and facilitate access for those who want to attend.¹⁹

Clinicians should be aware of the range of mutual aid groups available locally and how to access them. Level of clinician knowledge about Alcoholics Anonymous groups has been positively correlated with levels of referral,²⁴ and attending a meeting is an invaluable learning experience. Evidence from randomised controlled trials suggests that proactive efforts to engage patients with mutual aid groups increase attendance, particularly introducing the patient to a group member in advance of a meeting.²⁵ A simple three stage process to guide this is available (www.nta.nhs.uk/uploads/mutualaid-fama.pdf).

Relapse prevention drugs

Interventions based on psychological or social processes of change are the mainstay of treatment for alcohol dependence.²⁶ Although research suggests that such treatments lead to improved outcomes when compared with no treatment, the evidence favouring one type of psychological intervention over another is less clear. Other factors such as therapist characteristics and service variables are also important. The uptake and implementation of psychological approaches in the United Kingdom vary widely,^{19 27} and most practice involves an eclectic approach that combines strategies from various psychological approaches and typically lasts 12 weeks. In those who have decided to become abstinent from alcohol, this treatment is enhanced by both attendance at a mutual aid group and the prescribing of relapse prevention drugs. Several drugs can be prescribed in primary care, although they may all be started and monitored by a specialist.

Acamprosate and the opioid antagonist naltrexone—both these drugs are effective in increasing the time to first drink and to relapse in people with alcohol dependence who have achieved abstinence.¹⁹ Acamprosate may also be neuroprotective and is believed to act by altering the balance between excitatory and inhibitory neurotransmission.²⁰ Naltrexone seems to reduce cravings by reducing the reinforcing effect of alcohol consumption. Both drugs should only be used in combination with an individual psychological intervention, started as soon as possible after withdrawal, and may be prescribed for six months or more depending on perceived benefit. Systematic reviews suggest a number needed to treat to prevent return to any drinking of between 12 and 20.²⁸

Disulfiram—this drug works by interfering with the metabolism of alcohol, causing an accumulation of acetaldehyde in the body and a throbbing headache, facial flushing, palpitations, dyspnoea, tachycardia, nausea, and vomiting within 10 minutes of alcohol consumption. Its use as a deterrent is most suited to people who have abstinence as a goal and who have someone to supervise consumption each day. Treatment should be started at least 24 hours after the last alcoholic drink and should be used with caution in the context of pregnancy, liver disease, severe mental illness, stroke, heart disease, or hypertension. Patients need to know about the symptoms caused by the interaction between alcohol and disulfiram and the rare and unpredictable onset of hepatotoxicity, which is unrelated to dose.

Nalmefene—is an opioid antagonist that is indicated for the reduction of alcohol consumption in adults with alcohol dependence who have a high risk drinking level (>7.5 units/day in men and >5 units/day in women), but without physical withdrawal symptoms and who do not need immediate medically assisted withdrawal. The drug should be started only in patients who continue to have a high risk drinking level two weeks after initial assessment, and it should only be prescribed in conjunction with continuous psychosocial support focused on

treatment adherence and reducing alcohol consumption. Such psychosocial support can be delivered in primary care, and this seems to be a cost effective approach to dealing with higher risk drinking.²⁹ The recommended dose is one tablet on each day the patient perceives a risk of drinking, ideally 1-2 hours before the anticipated time of drinking.

When should people with alcohol use disorders be referred?

Referral for specialist treatment should be considered if patients have failed to benefit from a brief intervention or an extended brief intervention and want to receive further help, show signs of moderate or severe alcohol dependence (see table 1), or have severe alcohol related physical impairment or a related comorbid condition (for example, liver disease or mental health problems). General practitioners should actively encourage patients to attend local mutual aid groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, as well as access local specialist services for full assessment and management. The general practitioner's role in supporting patients and their family is crucial, as in any long term chronic disorder.

Contributors: ED was approached to write this review and produced the first draft. ED and AC were part of the guideline development group that produced the NICE clinical guideline 115, and used the searches conducted as part of the NICE process as the basis for the review. AC and MH commented on the initial draft and contributed sections on brief interventions (AC, MH), specialist treatment (AC), and drug treatment in primary care (MH). ED is the guarantor.

Competing interests: We have read and understood the BMJ policy on declaration of interests and declare: ED is a member of the Addictions Department at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London. The department is in receipt of or has received grants from the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) to research both drug and psychosocial treatments for alcohol use disorders. He is currently a coinvestigator on NIHR Health Technology Assessment grant (13/86/03) to investigate the effectiveness of adjunctive medication management and contingency management in enhancing adherence to drugs for relapse prevention in alcohol dependence. He is a trustee of the charities Action on Addiction and Changes UK. AC is an honorary member of the School of Psychology at the University of Birmingham, and his department is in receipt of or has received grants from the MRC and the NIHR to research psychosocial treatments for alcohol use disorders. He is chief investigator on a randomised controlled trial of a family and social network intervention for young people who misuse alcohol and drugs (HTA grant 11/60/01) and principal investigator on a pilot study to assess the feasibility and impact of a motivational intervention on problem drug and alcohol use in adult mental health inpatient units (NIHR—PB-PG-1010-23138). He is an expert advisor to the charity Action on Addiction. MH is a member of SMMGP (Substance Misuse Management in General Practice) and has been funded through SMMGP by Lundbeck to complete and tutor on the SMMGP advanced certificate in the community management of alcohol disorders.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

- 1 World Health Organization. Global status report on alcohol and health 2014. WHO, 2014.
- 2 Office for National Statistics. General lifestyle survey overview: a report on the 2009 general lifestyle survey. In: Dunstan S, ed. ONS, 2011.
- 3 Health and Social Care Information Centre. Statistics on alcohol: England, 2013. HSCIC, 2013.
- 4 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Alcohol-use disorders: preventing harmful drinking. (Public health guidance 24.) 2010. www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph24.
- 5 Funk M, Wutzke S, Kaner E, Anderson P, Pas L, McCormick R, et al. A multicountry controlled trial of strategies to promote dissemination and implementation of brief alcohol intervention in primary health care: findings of a World Health Organization collaborative study. *J Stud Alcohol* 2005;66:379-88.

Tips for non-specialists

- Consider the far reaching effects of alcohol, not only to individual physical and mental health, but to family members and the community as a whole
- Screen for alcohol problems in all healthcare settings, and particularly in high risk populations
- Providing structured brief advice and feedback is an effective strategy in high risk drinkers
- Adopt a positive, motivational approach to managing alcohol use disorders
- Take a long term, stepped care perspective, moving to more intensive interventions when a less intensive option has not worked
- Promote attendance at mutual aid groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or UK SMART Recovery wherever possible

Questions for future research

- What methods are effective for assessing and diagnosing the presence and severity of alcohol use disorders in children and young people?
- What are the most effective strategies for facilitating the delivery of alcohol identification and brief advice in routine clinical practice?
- Is an assertive community treatment model for moderate to severe alcohol dependence clinically and cost effective compared with standard care?
- For people with alcohol dependence, which drug is most likely to improve adherence and thereby promote abstinence and prevent relapse?

Additional educational resources*Resources for healthcare professionals*

- Public Health England Alcohol Learning Resources (www.alcohollearningcentre.org.uk/)—Collates the latest news on evidence based approaches to alcohol use disorders and their implementation in clinical practice. Includes the Alcohol Identification and Brief Advice e-learning project (www.alcohollearningcentre.org.uk/eLearning/IBA), a step by step interactive course on how to deliver identification and brief advice for professionals (free access)
- NICE pathways (<http://pathways.nice.org.uk/pathways/alcohol-use-disorders>)—Summarises all three NICE guidelines (PH24, CG100, and CG115) in the form of an interactive flowchart, and gathers together other resources such as service improvement audits, advice for commissioners, and information for the public (free access)
- World Health Organization global status report on alcohol and health 2014 (www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/global_alcohol_report/en/)—A comprehensive perspective on the global consumption of alcohol, patterns of drinking, health consequences, and policy responses (free access)
- National Institute of Alcohol and Alcoholism (<http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Practitioner/CliniciansGuide2005/guide.pdf>)—A practical guide on alcohol and alcoholism (free access)
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Alcohol-use disorders: diagnosis, assessment and management of harmful drinking and alcohol dependence. (Clinical guideline 115)—Chapter 2 provides a detailed review of the causes and consequences of alcohol use disorders

Resources for patients

- Change 4 Life (www.nhs.uk/Change4Life/Pages/drink-less-alcohol.aspx)—An interactive web based programme to help people drink less
- Alcoholics Anonymous (www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/) and UK SMART Recovery (www.smartrecovery.org.uk/)—Mutual aid organisations providing free meetings and support throughout the United Kingdom
- Alcohol Concern (www.alcoholconcern.org.uk/help-and-advice)—Help and advice with finding an alcohol treatment service in the United Kingdom
- Adfam (www.adfam.org.uk/)—A charity aiming to improve support for families affected by drug and alcohol problems

- Babor T, Caetano R, Casswell S, Edwards G, Giesbrecht N, Graham K, et al. Alcohol: no ordinary commodity: research and public policy. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Rice P, Drummond C. The price of a drink: the potential of alcohol minimum unit pricing as a public health measure in the UK. *Br J Psychiatry* 2012;201:169-71.
- House of Commons Science and Technology Committee. Alcohol guidelines: 11th report of session 2010-2012. Stationery Office, 2012.
- World Health Organization. The ICD-10 classification of mental and behavioural disorders. Geneva: WHO, 1992.
- American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, fifth edition. American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013.
- Hasin DS, O'Brien CP, Auriaconce M, et al. DSM-5 Criteria for Substance Use Disorders: Recommendations and Rationale. *Am J Psychiatry* 2013;170:834-51.
- Heather N. A radical but flawed proposal: comments on Rehm et al. defining substance use disorders: do we really need more than heavy use? *Alcohol Alcohol* 2013;48:646-7.
- Rehm J, Marmet S, Anderson P, Gual A, Kraus L, Nutt DJ, et al. Defining substance use disorders: do we really need more than heavy use? *Alcohol Alcohol* 2013;48:633-40.
- Jackson R, Johnson M, Campbell F, Messina J, Guillaume L, Meier P, et al. Screening and brief intervention for prevention and early identification of alcohol use disorder in adults and young people. School of Health and Related Research (ScHARR) Public Health Collaborating Centre, 2010.
- Kaner E, Bland M, Cassidy P, Coulton S, Dale V, Deluca P, et al. Effectiveness of screening and brief alcohol intervention in primary care (SIPS trial): pragmatic cluster randomised controlled trial. *BMJ* 2013;346:e8501.
- Babor TF, Higgins-Biddle JC, Saunders JB, Monteiro MG. AUDIT: the alcohol use disorder identification test. Guidelines for use in primary health care. World Health Organization, 2001. http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/2001/WHO_MSD_MSB_01.6a.pdf?ua=1.
- Drummond C, Ghodse H, Chengappa S. Use of investigations in the diagnosis and management of alcohol use disorders. In: Day E, ed. Clinical topics in addiction. RCPsych Publications, 2007:113-29.
- Rollnick S, Butler CC, Kinnerley P, Gregory J, Mash B. Motivational interviewing. *BMJ* 2010;340:1242-5.
- National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health. Alcohol-use disorders: the NICE guideline on diagnosis, assessment and management of harmful drinking and alcohol dependence. British Psychological Society and Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011.
- Lingford-Hughes AR, Welch S, Peters L, Nutt DJ; British Association for Psychopharmacology, Expert Reviewers Group. BAP updated guidelines: evidence-based guidelines for the pharmacological management of substance abuse, harmful use, addiction and comorbidity: recommendations from BAP. *J Psychopharmacol* 2012;26:899-952.
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Alcohol-use disorders: diagnosis and clinical management of alcohol-related physical complications. (Clinical guideline 100.) 2010. <http://guidance.nice.org.uk/CG100>.
- Marlatt GA, Gordon JR. Relapse prevention: maintenance strategies in the treatment of addictive behaviors. Guilford Press, 1985.
- Moos RH, Moos BS. Participation in treatment and Alcoholics Anonymous: a 16-year follow-up of initially untreated individuals. *J Clin Psychol* 2006;62:735-50.
- Wall R, Sondhi A, Day E. What influences referral to 12-step mutual self-help groups by treatment professionals. *Eur Addict Res* 2014;20:241-7.
- Timko C, DeBenedetti A. A randomized controlled trial of intensive referral to 12-step self-help groups: one-year outcomes. *Drug Alcohol Depend* 2007;90:270-9.
- Raistrick D, Heather N, Godfrey C. Review of the effectiveness of treatment for alcohol problems. National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse, 2006. www.nta.nhs.uk/uploads/nta_review_of_the_effectiveness_of_treatment_for_alcohol_problems_fullreport_2006_alcohol2.pdf.

- 27 Drummond C, Oyefeso A, Phillips T, Cheeta S, Deluca P, Perryman K, et al. Alcohol needs assessment research project (ANARP). The 2004 national alcohol needs assessment for England. Department of Health, 2004:1-31.
- 28 Jonas DE, Amick HR, Feltner C, Bobashev G, Thomas K, Wines R, et al. Pharmacotherapy for adults with alcohol use disorders in outpatient settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA* 2014;311:1889-900.
- 29 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Nalmefene for reducing alcohol consumption in people with alcohol dependence. (Technology appraisal guidance TA325). 2014. www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ta325.
- 30 Public Health England. Young people's hospital alcohol pathways: support pack for A&E departments. PHE, 2014.
- 31 Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. Alcohol use among older adults: pocket screening for health and social care providers. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2001.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2015;350:h715

© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2015

Tables

Table 1| Classification and definition of alcohol use disorders

Category of drinking	Definition	AUDIT score
Low risk	No amount of alcohol consumption can be called "safe," but risks of harm are low if consumption is below levels specified in the "increasing risk" category (below)	≤7
Increasing risk (hazardous)	Regularly drinking more than 2 or 3 units a day (women) and more than 3 or 4 units a day (men)	8-15
Higher risk (harmful)	Regularly drinking more than 6 units daily (women) or more than 8 units daily (men), or more than 35 units weekly (women) or more than 50 units weekly (men)	16-19
Dependence, as defined by ICD-10 (international classification of diseases, 10th revision) ⁹	A definite diagnosis of dependence should be made only if three or more of the following have been present at the same time during the previous year: (a) a strong desire or sense of compulsion to drink alcohol; difficulties in controlling drinking behaviour in terms of its onset, termination, or levels of consumption; a physiological withdrawal state when drinking has stopped or been reduced, as evidenced by the characteristic alcohol withdrawal syndrome, or use of the same (or a closely related) substance with the intention of relieving or avoiding withdrawal symptoms—for example, benzodiazepines; (d) evidence of tolerance, such that increased quantities of alcohol are required to achieve the effects originally produced by lesser amounts; (e) progressive neglect of alternative pleasures or interests because of alcohol consumption, increased amount of time necessary to obtain or drink alcohol or to recover from its effects; (f) persisting with drinking alcohol despite clear evidence of overtly harmful consequences, such as harm to the liver, depressive mood states, or impaired cognitive functioning. It is an essential characteristic of the dependence syndrome that either alcohol consumption or a desire to drink alcohol is present; the subjective awareness of compulsion to drink alcohol is most commonly seen during attempts to stop or control substance use	≥20

AUDIT=alcohol use disorders identification test.

Table 2| Suggested titrated fixed dose chlordiazepoxide protocol for treatment of alcohol withdrawal. From National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health¹⁹

Treatment day	15-25 units/day		30-49 units/day		50-60 units/day
	Moderate dependence: SADQ score 15-25		Severe dependence: SADQ score 30-40		Very severe dependence: SADQ score 40-60
Day 1 (starting dose)	15 mg four times/day	25 mg four times/day	30 mg four times/day	40 mg four times/day*	50 mg four times/day†
Day 2	10 mg four times/day	20 mg four times/day	25 mg four times/day	35 mg four times/day*	45 mg four times/day†
Day 3	10 mg three times/day	15 mg four times/day	20 mg four times/day	30 mg four times/day	40 mg four times/day*
Day 4	5 mg three times/day	10 mg four times/day	15 mg four times/day	25 mg four times/day	35 mg four times/day*
Day 5	5 mg twice/day	10 mg three times/day	10 mg four times/day	20 mg four times/day	30 mg four times/day
Day 6	5 mg at night	5 mg three times/day	10 mg three times/day	15 mg four times/day	25 mg four times/day
Day 7	—	5 mg twice/day	5 mg three times/day	10 mg four times/day	20 mg four times/day
Day 8	—	5 mg at night	5 mg twice/day	10 mg three times/day	15 mg four times/day
Day 9	—	—	5 mg at night	5 mg three times/day	10 mg four times/day
Day 10	—	—	—	5 mg twice/day	10 mg three times/day
Day 11	—	—	—	5 mg at night	5 mg three times/day
Day 12	—	—	—	—	5 mg twice/day
Day 13	—	—	—	—	5 mg at night

SADQ=severity of alcohol dependence questionnaire (www.alcohollearningcentre.org.uk/Topics/Latest/Resource/?cid=4615).

*Doses of chlordiazepoxide >30 mg four times/day should be prescribed only in severe alcohol dependence, with response to treatment monitored regularly and closely.

†Doses of chlordiazepoxide >40 mg four times/day should be prescribed only in very severe alcohol dependence. Such doses are rarely necessary in women and children and never in older people or in patients with liver impairment.

Figures

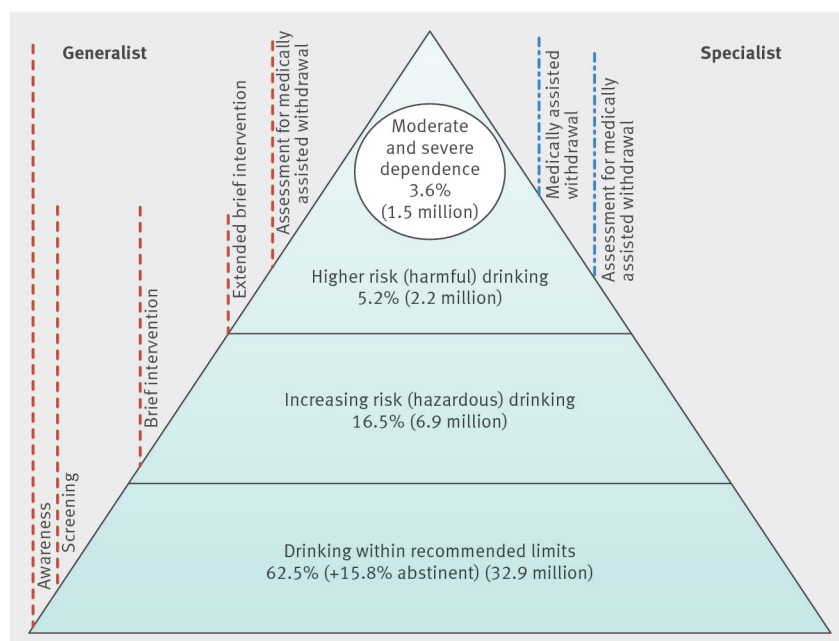


Fig 1 Prevalence of alcohol use disorders in England (taken from general household survey 2009 and psychiatric morbidity survey 2007) and recommended treatment strategies across the spectrum

Alcohol use disorders identification test (AUDIT)

1. How often do you have a drink containing alcohol? (0) Never (1) Monthly or less (2) 2-4 times a month (3) 2-3 times a week (4) 4 or more times a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	6. How often during the past year have you needed a first drink in the morning to get yourself going after a heavy drinking session? (0) Never (1) Less than monthly (2) Monthly (3) Weekly (4) Daily or almost daily	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. How many units of alcohol do you have on a typical day when you are drinking? (0) 1 or 2 (1) 3 or 4 (2) 5 or 6 (3) 7, 8, or 9 (4) 10 or more	<input type="checkbox"/>	7. How often during the past year have you had a feeling of guilt or remorse after drinking? (0) Never (1) Less than monthly (2) Monthly (3) Weekly (4) Daily or almost daily	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. How often do you have 6 or more units if female, or 8 or more units if male, on a single occasion in the past year? (0) Never (1) Less than monthly (2) Monthly (3) Weekly (4) Daily or almost daily	<input type="checkbox"/>	8. How often during the past year have you been unable to remember what happened the night before because you had been drinking? (0) Never (1) Less than monthly (2) Monthly (3) Weekly (4) Daily or almost daily	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. How often during the past year have you found that you were not able to stop drinking once you had started? (0) Never (1) Less than monthly (2) Monthly (3) Weekly (4) Daily or almost daily	<input type="checkbox"/>	9. Have you or someone else been injured as a result of your drinking? (0) No (2) Yes, but not in the past year (4) Yes, during the past year	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. How often during the past year have you failed to do what was normally expected from you because of drinking? (0) Never (1) Less than monthly (2) Monthly (3) Weekly (4) Daily or almost daily	<input type="checkbox"/>	10. Has a relative or friend, doctor, or another health worker been concerned about your drinking or suggested that you cut down? (0) No (2) Yes, but not in the past year (4) Yes, during the past year	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Total score:	<input type="checkbox"/>

Fig 2 Alcohol use disorders identification test